

Richard McWhannell

b.1952

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Throughout his art career, Richard McWhannell has shown us life in suspended animation. The sense of stillness and relaxed familiarity that characterises his portraiture has its origins in his early landscape painting. In the early 1970s he spent time in Nelson with Toss Woollaston who encouraged him to abandon realism and paint his personal response to the landscape.

McWhannell was influenced by the regionalist landscape style practised by his tutors Doris Lusk and Bill Sutton, and recorded his impressions of locations that were most familiar to him.

In 1978 McWhannell relocated to Auckland and painted the city that surrounded him. These cityscapes and rural landscapes share a sense of emptiness – no people populate these scenes. However, by the 1980s McWhannell had shifted subjects and almost exclusively painted people, often using himself as his subject. Self-portraiture and the prolonged study of his own physical appearance enabled McWhannell to develop skill in painting human anatomy. His ability to accurately portray bone structure, muscle and flesh tone allowed him to extend the conventions of portraiture, often exaggerating features and contorting figures. In this can be seen the influence of Tony Fomison, a close friend of McWhannell and a major influence on his work during the 1980s.

He has recently focussed on painting portraits and prefers to paint people he knows personally, often family and friends. Renee, the sitter for *Hands On Table, Renee II*, has appeared as McWhannell's model in a number of portraits. Rather than a formal portrait with the sitter dressed in their smartest clothes and posed to best effect, this portrait is casual and intimate. Renee is not idealised. She is an ordinary person who we might expect to meet on the street.

McWhannell has chosen a domestic scene, suggested by the kitchen table, coffee cup and bowl. The strong directional light from the right side of the painting indicates a window and serves to locate the sitter within a space – a reminder, too, that her world extends beyond the picture frame. This device was used by the American painter Edward Hopper, whose work is mentioned in connection with McWhannell's. The muted

palette and smooth application of paint creates a sense of calm, while the shallow pictorial space and lack of background detail directs our attention to the sitter. Renee's clothing and jewellery might also provide clues to her life and personality. Is she single or married? Practical or frivolous? Proud or modest?

As well as being a conventional portrait, *Hands On Table, Renee II* is a painting about the process of portraiture and the engagement between the artist and his subject. Renee is shown waiting while McWhannell paints her image. Rested with her elbows on the table, her feet pointed inwards and a hint of a smile, she appears relaxed and calm; comfortable, but possibly bored – have you any idea how many hours of sitting still a portrait like this might take? Her steady gaze is directed at the artist but also engages us, the viewer, challenging us to meet her eye. In doing so, we enter the same state of suspended animation. Our lives become still for as long as we hold her gaze.

Christine Whybrew

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Tony Fomison
 Edward Hopper
 Doris Lusk
 Bill Sutton

